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U.S. Intelligence A Failure in Asia

THERE IS A good deal of talk here about President Nixon's plans to reorganize our foreign intelligence services. According to one account, the President was infuriated by the Defense Intelligence Agency's misreading of Hanoi's probable response to the Laotian incursion. "Hanoi threw 35,000 men of four divisions against the 17,000 in ARVN," an intelligence source told the Times' Benjamin Welles. "They stripped North Vietnam of troops, gambling that the United States wouldn't invade the North—and they were right. Their estimates were better than ours."

This allegation, if verified, should not only lead to the reorganization of our intelligence structure, but should generate the instant dismissal of everyone in the DIA who had a hand in preparing the estimate. The notion that Hanoi was going to hold back its strategic reserve to counter a possible invasion was simply preposterous. It could only have been made by men without the slightest understanding of, or respect for, the intelligence of the enemy.

Indeed, this has been one of the curses of the war. From the outset, military strategy was formulated on an appalling underestimation of Hanoi's determination and capacity. While they would, of course, deny it today, Washington was in 1964-65 full of optimistic technocrats who were certain that Ho Chi Minh would collapse with fright the first time an F-105 buzzed Hanoi. The strategy of bombing North Vietnam was thought of as a way of preventing a war, as a technique of scaring the North off South Vietnam.

WHEN ONE CRITIC opposed the bombing strategy in an article in The Washington Post in the spring of 1965, he was informed on a background basis by high State Department and Pentagon figures that his somber pessimism was unjustified. He was told that he simply didn't appreciate the virtues of air power. When he argued that Ho Chi Minh was not the chief of a primitive hill tribe, but a totalitarian genius dedicated to conquering all of former French Indochina, at whatever cost, these briefers ob-

viously wrote him off as an ideological nut. He was informed that the "intelligence community" (which presumably excluded ideological nuts) was in full agreement that the North Vietnamese response to the bombing would be "defensive."

In 1971 the same crew seems to be calling the shots. Let us look for a minute at the view from Hanoi of the Laotian incursion. Hanoi has political experts who follow American opinion (in fact, one of their best men holds a Ph.D. in political science from a distinguished American university). Suppose you put the question to Hanoi's American desk: "How would the Americans react to an invasion of North Vietnam?" After the Cambodian convulsion, it would hardly take a Ph.D. in political science to answer that one.

SO THEN YOU go down the hall to the military intelligence division and ask its members: "Do the Americans and South Vietnamese have the assets for an invasion of North Vietnam?" Since they can count, they can make an extremely accurate assessment of our

order of battle. Taking into consideration the rapid decrease in American combat troops, the ARVN operations in Cambodia, and other facts about the state of combat readiness of various ARVN divisions, it is not hard to guess their reply: "The use of crack troops for the Laotian incursion has eliminated any possibility of a diversionary maneuver into the North."

Of course, in a rather pathetic exercise in psychological warfare, President Thieu in Saigon made noises about invading the North. However, far from influencing Hanoi, all that Thieu did was to arouse the doves in the United States. In the event what Gen. Giap did was to strip North Vietnam of its strategic reserve and throw the whole force into containing ARVN in Laos. It probably cost him a good deal in manpower—he had to bunch his forces where our planes could get at them—but in political terms it was probably worth it. Laos got billed as an American defeat, as a failure of Vietnamization. In fact, it was an inexcusable failure in American intelligence.

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